

Understanding

by Dr. Janet Kelly

Wave 8 Mar 1984

Expecting a baby? Whether it's for the first or the fifth time, there are probably a hundred questions you would like to have answered, or perhaps think you already know the answer to. The answers to your pregnancy-related questions are often answered by well-meaning friends, mothers, or aunts who often give conflicting advice or opinions. The medical community often times adds to the confusion by changing its mind every few years about what is best for you and your growing baby. Weight gain is one area where this is certainly true. Mother will say you're too skinny while your husband will say you're too fat. And several years ago a doctor might have put you on a strict diet if he saw you had gained 20 pounds by your seventh month. Let's take a look at what the latest thinking and current recommendations are.

In the past 20 years we have come to appreciate that maternal nutrition before and during pregnancy can affect the growth and development of the fetus. Both the number of calories and the quantity of specific nutrients consumed are important in this respect. Even in a normal, healthy woman, restricting caloric intake will result in a drop in birth weight. But if the woman is already underweight, the fetal outcome is even poorer.

Your prepregnant weight is important in determining how much weight to gain while pregnant. A normal-weight mother must gain about 25-30 pounds to produce a fetus of optimal weight and an underweight mother needs to gain proportionally more. Even an obese woman should gain around 15 pounds in order to give birth to a normal weight infant. The mother cannot call on her reserves

to adequately maintain fetal growth and, if she has little or no reserve, she will not deplete herself to support the normal growth of her fetus.

Many mistakes can be made around this point. A common one is for a woman to panic when she sees she has already gained 25 pounds by the seventh or eighth month. She then curtails her calories at a time when the most

active brain development is occurring in the baby and the calories are needed. Another common error is for a woman to

g Your Body

think that smaller birth weight infants would be nice and less trouble during delivery. In fact, it has been shown that an infant who has been nutritionally deprived while a fetus has a lower IQ and

more health problems than his well-nourished counterpart. In addition, there is some danger that an undernourished fetus may absorb toxic substances accumulated and stored in the mother's body fat if enough fresh calories are not ingested.

Where does that 25-30 pounds go if the infant only weighs 8

pounds? About 2 pounds are needed for the mother's expanded blood volume, another 3-4 pounds for breast enlargement, and about 1-2 pounds for uterine expansion. In addition, about 7-10 pounds of "lactation fat" will be deposited. The amniotic fluid usually weighs about 1 pound and the placenta about 1-2 pounds.

The rate at which weight is gained may vary, but a good average to aim at is 3-5 pounds during the first 3 months and about 3 pounds per month thereafter. Pregnancy is no time for a woman to lose weight.